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INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

Princeton, New Jersey

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School of Historical Studies

15 November 1950

Dear Mrs. McCormick:

I have never been one to write "letters to the Editor", but I have so high a regard for your judgment that it disturbs me particularly when I see it moving far from my own; and being no longer a responsible Government official -- being, in fact, in the helpless ignominy of a seige of the grippe -- I feel myself moved to write you about your column "Double X" in the Times of November 13.

What disturbs me is, first, the suggestion, implicit in your column as in so many other things being written today, that there is something new and different about recent events in the Far East -- something that represents a new program and initiative on the part of Moscow and Peiping, and, secondly, what seems to me to be the failure to recognize how much of the present situation in Korea is, world realities being what they are, the calculable result of our own actions.

The desire to see an expansion of their own political influence has been a permanent feature of the outlook of the Bolshevik rulers since their accession to power in 1917, if only for the reason that their ideology taught them to view all other power as bearing a deadly enmity toward them and as constituting, accordingly, something to be destroyed as rapidly and expeditiously as possible. In the policies which have governed their efforts to bring about such an expansion of their power, they have never at any time rejected the instrument of revolt and civil war in other countries. On the contrary this has been, ideologically speaking, their dream and their favored weapon. Thus there has never been a time, since 1917, when the Kremlin would have refrained from encouraging its supporters in a country contiguous to the frontiers of its power to rise and seize power in civil insurrection, if the chances of success were good enough to warrant the attendant local risks and if the venture did not appear to involve international complications likely to be detrimental to the total interests of Communist power.

When, accordingly, we withdrew our forces from Korea, failed to give adequate armaments to the South Korean forces, and permitted

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statements to appear here which could easily be interpreted as expressions of military disinterestedness, we ourselves established, it seems to me, the pre-conditions for action by the Korean Communists. Our simultaneous lack of inhibition in making it clear that we were prepared to conclude a separate treaty with Japan and to keep U.S. forces in that country added another urgent incentive to those that already existed for a Communist seizure of power in Korea.

Our entry into the affair had been regarded in Communist quarters as unlikely, and caused great concern in both Moscow and Peiping when it came. As long as we were unsuccessful and were being pushed back toward Pusan, there was no reason for intervention from the Soviet or Chinese Communist side, since neither desired international complications; and both waited with baited breath to see whether the situation would not be greatly eased, if not indeed turned to Communist advantage, by our being finally expelled from the peninsula.

The Inchon landings took both Communist camps by surprise and our rapid advance toward and across the 38th parallel unquestionably called for the most anxious and alarmed consultations between them. I think it likely that these were the first consultations they had had on the subject. They may well have been difficult and time consuming as a consequence of certain obscurities in the mutual relationships over Manchuria, -- obscurities which each had found it preferable to tolerate in the past but which now had to be faced and clarified. Moscow, long accustomed to deflecting Japanese ambitions in that area by embroiling the Japanese with the Chinese, and seeing in us another version of the old Japanese adversary, returned to this traditional game. What induced the Chinese to play at this game, we can only conjecture. It was probably a mixture of several factors, among which Communist discipline, a real concern about U.S. intentions, and possibly some material Russian bribes in the form of concessions in Manchuria, may all have played a part. But that the move into Korea was essentially an alarmed reaction to what we had done in moving toward the Yalu border, I have no doubt.

In all of this, I find no reason to look for any "grand design" beyond the traditional and well-known outlooks and habits of Bolshevik power. The same is true of what you refer to as "Moscow's moves in Eastern Europe", which you see duplicated in Asia. Moscow's control over Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia, was created and assured by the advance of the Red Army at the close of the war with Germany. There was never the slightest reason to suppose that Moscow would fail to take advantage of this trend of military events for her political purposes; and we ourselves, far from raising any serious objection to it, aided and abetted it in many ways which in Moscow's eyes appeared to be sanction.

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What I am driving at is that except for the Finnish war I know of no instance where the Soviet Union has moved its forces across international boundaries for aggressive purposes, unless, as was the case in 1939-40, and again in 1944-45, this was by tacit or written agreement with some capitalist state. It has, on the contrary, never been averse to profiting by civil wars. I therefore see nothing novel in the Korean situation, and nothing more menacing, from the standpoint of Soviet intentions, than what we have seen all along since 1917. The Kremlin was genuinely concerned and incensed at the U.N.'s stamping the Korean affair as "aggression" because it had always gone on the theory that civil wars were not the international community's business and it sincerely viewed the Korean affair as coming within the category of a civil war.

As for Communist China, I think, again, that it would be wrong to look at its behavior as a reflection of some particular aggressive program. China has always had, in modern times, an imperialistic attitude toward the areas around its frontier -- Tibet, Annam, and Korea: all places which once acknowledged China's sovereignty. The Indo Chinese affairs has been going on for years, and the only thing that has really changed its aspect has been the accession of Chinese Communist power to the adjacent border region. What did we expect them to do, on the establishment of their authority along the Indo-Chinese frontier? Surely not to discourage Ho and restrain him. As for Formosa, the winners of a civil war would naturally be concerned over the final bit of territory on which their opponents had taken refuge, -- and would be determined to overrun it; and as long as their opponents, with the blessing of the international community, insisted that that territory was Chinese, they could hardly be expected to agree otherwise.

You may say: Yes, but I ignore in all this the factor of the U.N. -- that South Korea was a U.N. child; that the intervention in Korea is a U.N. intervention; that the communists should respect this. My answer would be that we are not being realistic if we ascribe to others our feelings and our fictions about the U.N. In the communist view, this is an American intervention which we have successfully managed to cloak with an aura of international approval and participation. It would never occur to them that the interests underlying it could be other than in the national interests of American power. And they cannot believe that we could take the U.N. so seriously, or that our disciplinary power of our supporting majority could be so weak, that we would be in any way restrained or influenced by the U.N. in the pursuit of our interests on the mainland.

My thesis, then, is that we are dealing here only with something which is well-known and familiar, and that we had no right to expect

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our own conduct in the Korean matter to produce results much different than those we have seen. I say this with some mortification, and it is not a criticism of others; for I feel that I shared in the general remissness about recognizing some of the things which should have been obvious. But it will do us no good today to persuade ourselves that we are the victims of some new and unforeseen apparition on our international horizon, and we will not enhance our ability to see realistically in the future by indulging ourselves in such a view.

With apologies for writing at such length, and with the request that this not go further than your own professional associates, I am,

Very sincerely,

George Kennan

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